



FREMANTLE FORTRESS

- WORLD WAR 2 COASTAL DEFENCE FACILITIES -



THE THREAT OF WAR

In 1931 Japan invaded Manchuria and in the following year withdrew from the League of Nations. In 1932 the Australian Government proceeded to overhaul defence plans for the Commonwealth and by 1933 a Three Year Defence Program was underway. The need to defend vulnerable points on the Australian coastline became a priority. On the west coast priority was given to establishing new gun batteries on Rottnest and Garden Islands and modernising the existing batteries on the mainland, with the objective of protecting the port of Fremantle from bombardment by ship-borne long range guns.

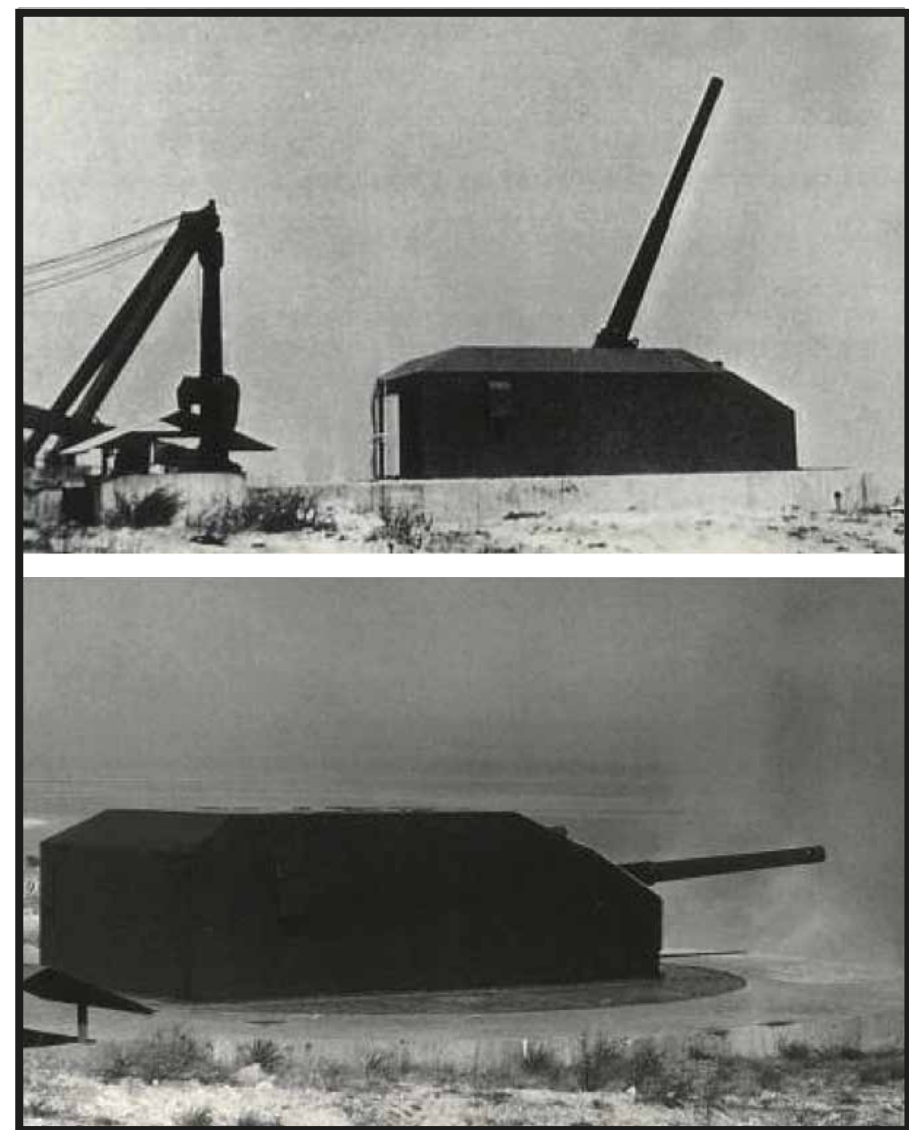
LEIGHTON BATTERY

Two tunnel entrances lead to a 300 metre long complex of tunnels and rooms, up to 10 metres deep, excavated in solid limestone, supporting the operation of three 6 inch and four 3.7 inch anti-aircraft gun emplacements on the surface. The construction of the extensive underground tunnel network was an excellent technical achievement. The Leighton Battery became operational in February 1943 as an 'examination' battery to establish the bona fides of ships arriving in Gage Roads.

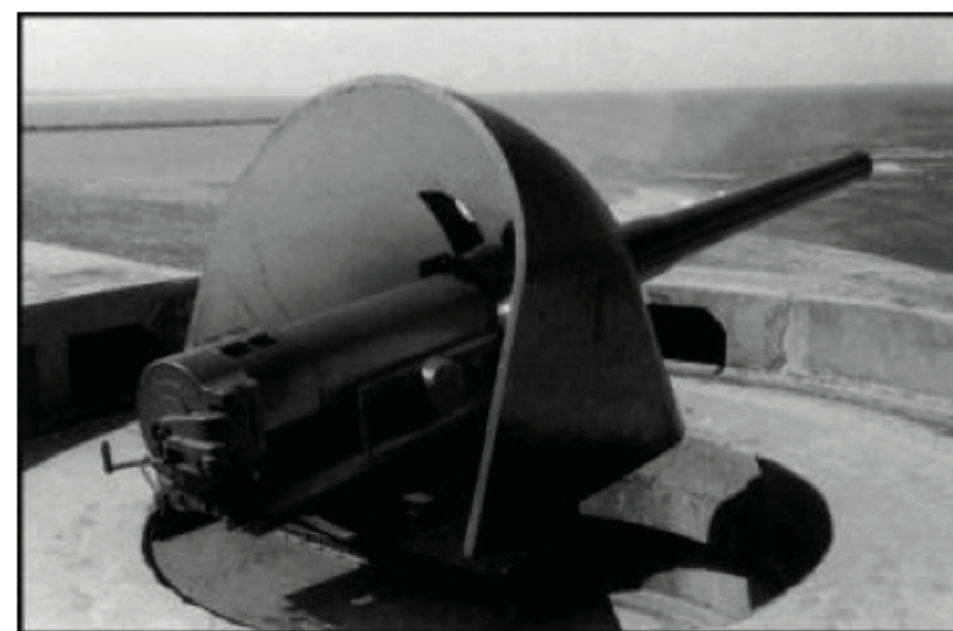
In 1944 it was decided to install 5.25 inch dual role coastal artillery/anti-aircraft batteries at Leighton, South Fremantle and Point Peron but the Leighton battery was the only one completed, becoming operational in 1947.



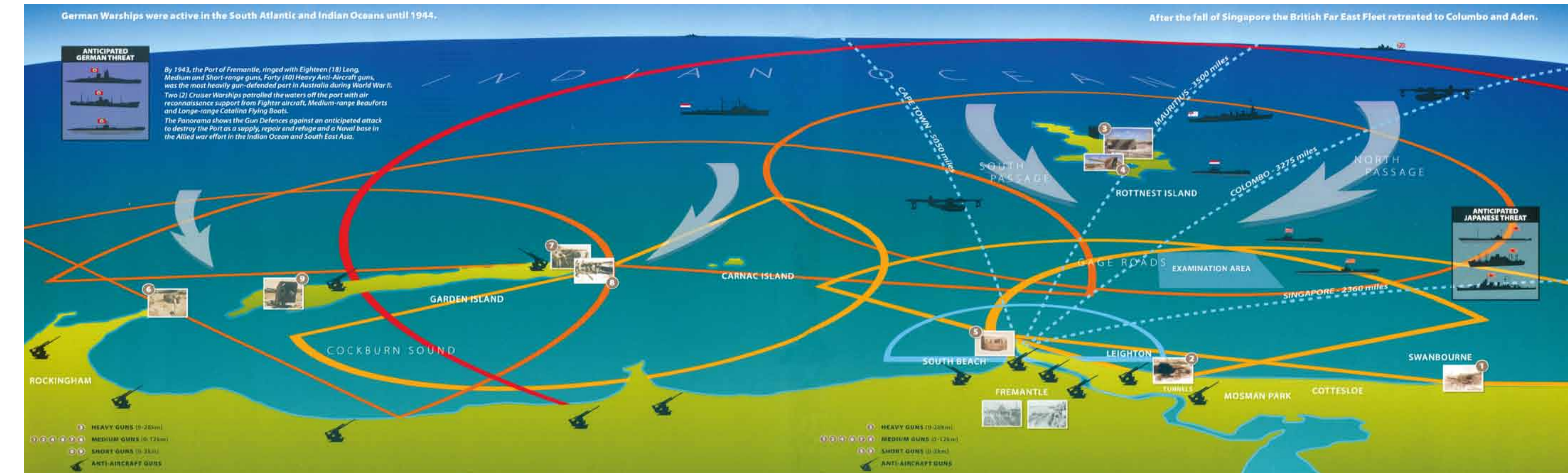
3.7 inch A/A Gun and crew, Leighton



5.25 inch Coast/AA Gun firing in the Anti-Aircraft mode (above) and coastal defence mode (below), Leighton



6 inch gun emplacement, Leighton



FREMANTLE FORTRESS The original plan for strengthening the defence of Fremantle was to place long range 9.2 inch guns on the mainland at Buckland Hill (Leighton), but it was realised that this strategy would not have prevented the bombardment of Fremantle Harbour by enemy cruisers equipped with 8 inch guns. The focus then turned to Rottnest Island, where 9.2 inch guns could engage hostile ships well before they were in range of the port. Additional 6 inch gun batteries were installed at Rottnest, Arthur Head (Fremantle) and Swanbourne. Construction of facilities and installation of artillery equipment were supervised by the Royal Australian Engineers and the Royal Australian Artillery.

When war broke out on 3 September 1939 the batteries at Rottnest Island, Arthur Head and Swanbourne were operational. In early 1942 it was decided to re-locate the Arthur Head battery to Buckland Hill (Leighton). Additional batteries were subsequently installed at Garden Island and Point Peron to complete Fortress Fremantle.



9.2 inch gun barrel and mount on rail carriage en route to Oliver Hill, Rottnest Island c 1938



9.2 inch gun, Oliver Hill, Rottnest Island (Photo Don Young)



Gun room, 9.2 inch gun, Oliver Hill, Rottnest Island (Photo Don Young)



6 Heavy Battery personnel using a grab capstan to haul a gun shield (6 inch gun) into place c 1938, Bickley Point, Rottnest Island

ROTTNEST ISLAND BATTERIES

The whole complex was built over the period 1935-1939, becoming operational just before the outbreak of WW2. The main components were two 9.2 inch ex naval guns installed at Oliver Hill; two 6 inch guns installed at Bickley Point; Kingstown Barracks, to accommodate military personnel and their families; a railway to service the batteries; observation posts, radar towers, searchlight positions, upgraded airstrip and jetty, and other infrastructure to accommodate a large number of personnel and services. The work was carried out before the days of modern earthmoving equipment and large capacity mobile cranes. The railway embankment was formed using horse drawn scoops and wheelbarrows. Gantry cranes were designed, built and erected at loading and unloading sites. Extensive use was made of rollers and hand operated capstans to haul large pieces of machinery such as the 9.2 inch gun barrels into position. The Oliver Hill 9.2 inch gun is the only one of its type remaining in Australia.

EMINENT PERSONS



Lyons



Hobbs



Sturdee



Hussey

Eminent Australian persons associated with the planning and execution of the Fremantle Fortress WW2 Coastal Defence Facilities were Mr Joseph Lyons (Prime Minister of Australia 1932-1939; Lieutenant- General Sir J.J. Talbot Hobbs (WW1 artillery expert); Colonel V.A.H. Sturdee (Australian Director of Military Operations and intelligence 1934-1939; and Captain B. F. Hussey RAE (Engineer-in-Charge on Rottnest Island 1935-1940).

Engineering Heritage National Markers were awarded to Fremantle Fortresses-Rottnest Island on 10 Nov, 2010, and to Fremantle Fortresses-Leighton Battery on 23rd June 2014

Acknowledgements - Town of Mosman Park, Royal Australian Artillery Historical Society, National Servicemen's Association, Rottnest Island Authority and Mosman Park Returned Services League. Historical photos courtesy of RAAHS and National Trust, Aust.



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